

# Literature Institute Study Guide

## LIT 513 Renaissance

**Instructions for the Study Guide:** Please use the questions to develop a deeper understanding of the text and to review the concepts. As you read, consider the questions. Keeping careful notes or a journal will help you prepare to write the essays at the end of each section as well as the final essay. Your required and supplemental readings can be found in the “Readings” file.

**Instructions for Essays:** Please write a 1,250 – 1,500 word essay that responds to the essay questions. Then, send your essay to your professor. You may send an outline and drafts to your instructor for feedback and guidance before you send your finished essay.

**Instructions for Final Essay:** Please write a 5,000 word essay that responds to the essay questions. Then, send your essay to your professor. You may send an outline and drafts to your instructor for feedback and guidance before you send your finished essay.

### COURSE OBJECTIVES

- O1. Identify and describe the core attributes of the Renaissance, and discuss how new ideas about humanism and humanistic artistic expression took root.
- O2. Explain the relationship between the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, and discuss examples of literature in each.
- O3. Discuss the relationship of literature to the encounters with new worlds and ideas in the Americas and Asia.
- O4. Discuss Renaissance drama, its characteristic form, function, and themes.
- O5. Describe the emergence of the sonnet, and explain the Shakespearean and Petrarchan forms.
- O6. Explore the relationship between themes of love in Renaissance literature and the ideas of transcendence and humanistic ideas.

UNIT	WEEKS	TOPICS
I	1-3	<b>Lyric Poetry</b> Francesco Petrararch (1304-1374) Canzioneri Renaissance Love Lyrics
	Overview	Stylized Romance in the Love Lyric
	Introduction	Only slightly younger than Dante, Petrarch is appreciably closer to what we consider the Renaissance, and farther from Mediaeval Christianity, than is Dante. You can test this difference in Petrarch’s <i>Ascent of Mount Ventoux</i> , which ‘feels like a real mountain’ in a way that the ‘mountains’ of Dante’s <i>Divine Comedy</i> do not (and do not aspire to.) It is of timely interest that Petrarch climbs at least in part the way a tourist climbs: to savor the view. (Remember the mediaeval travelers we studied—from Egeria to Ibn Batuta and Marco Polo.
	Question	Q1. Did those travelers travel as ‘tourists’?) When you turn to Petrarch’s love sonnets you may find a similarly modern concern for realistic detail, under the surface of a formal verse structure. Does Petrarch make you feel the ‘genuineness’ of his love? How does his love poetry—and that of Wyatt or Louise Labe—compare to the Egyptian and Hebrew love poetry we examined in LIT 511? Does love poetry reflect historical development, or does love poetry ‘remain relatively the same’ through the ages?
	Question Theme: Love	Q2. Discuss the theme of love in Petrarch’s work. When Petrarch describes his love for Laura, how does he manage to express the different mindsets of the lover, as well as the multi-faceted nature of love itself? Look at the word choices and metaphors he uses. Is there any attempt to establish new conventions? Please

find passages in the poems to support your points.

**Essay** E1: Discuss the theme of love in Renaissance lyric poetry, and the types of poetic forms that are used. Compare and contrast different forms of sonnets used in the Renaissance.

## II 4-6 Epic Poetry

Milton  
Paradise Lost

Overview Christian Tragedy and its Epic Overcoming

Introduction We have already read several epic poems, though only Dante's *Divine Comedy* aspired to be a Christian epic. (The *Inferno*, for that matter, is the least 'beatific' part of Dante's poem.) The challenge of writing such a work is perhaps greater than the challenges that faced Homer (presenting heroic deeds and a gutsy homecoming) or Virgil (presenting the founding of a great secular Empire.) Milton takes it upon him self to dramatize, in iambic hexameters of a formal, and Latinate, quality the events that led to the Fall of Man and the Rebellion of the corrupted angels under Satan. Though it has often been remarked that the Devil is the most vivid character in this amazing drama, the complete cast of divine and fallen characters is a tightly integrated package. Ask yourself, as you read this poem, whether the truths of theology are compatible with the entertainment component central to any work of art.

Question Q1. Do other religions than Christianity find them selves immortalized in epic poetry? Is it possible to depict full blooded 'characters' who derive from the ultimate 'truths' of a religion? Do you find Milton's language a challenge? How does it compare in ease of reading with Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which precedes it as a text, and which you will read later in this course?

Question Themes: Free Will, Sin Q2. Discuss the theme of free will and taking responsibility for actions in Paradise Lost. In Milton's poem, what do Adam and Eve's actions say about choice? To what extent can a person choose between good and evil? What are Satan's arguments for disobeying God? How does Satan move them toward this? How does Milton show that Satan's arguments are specious?

**Essay** E2: Discuss the elements of Milton's poem that make it an epic. Who are the heroes? What is their journey? What are the heroic deeds and events in the poem? How are the religious concepts and worldview of a nation illustrated?

## III 7-9 Fiction

Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549)  
The Heptameron

Overview Woman's Tales at the Crossroads of Desire and Love

Introduction In the preface to her book of tales, Marguerite de Navarre pays tribute to the example of Boccaccio, whose *Decameron* we have read. Can you see why? (Both authors work out a set of tales framed by an event which isolates the narrators from society, and throws them back on their own narrative resources. Chaucer did the same). And isn't it relevant, to Marguerite's tribute to Boccaccio, that she too decides to devote her narrative development to 'tales of love.' (By now, after reading Sappho, Ibn Hazm, Louise Labe, Petrarch, etc., you are aware that the tradition of love poetry is long and strong. Remember that the next time you buy your sweetheart a Valentine's day love card!)

Question Q1. What, finally, do you think of Marguerite de Navarre's treatment of love in the tale of Florida and Amadour? How does the development of that tale illustrate the conflict between carnal and Platonic love?

Question Theme: Q2. Compare and contrast medieval chivalric love and worldly or erotic love. How do the concepts of love and honor differ between Florida and Amador?

Love

Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616)  
*Don Quixote*

Overview Mockery and Nostalgia: The first Spanish Novelist

Introduction You have been reading comedy of different kinds, epic poetry likewise, and with Boccaccio the beginnings of prose fiction. With Cervantes' prose epic tale, often considered 'the first novel,' you come onto a work which blends all these earlier styles and genres. At the same time, as critics realize, Cervantes is more 'modern' than any of these background settings can explain. In trying to figure out the modernity of this author you might consider that he and Shakespeare share the same death year.

Question Q1. Can you see anything in common to the two writers? (You are about to read Shakespeare's artful *The Tempest*.) Is there some blend of irony, romance, dream in the two works? What, incidentally, do you make of the Don's romantic nostalgia for the past, which is the starting point for the whole work? Have we encountered historical nostalgia up to this point? Is Cervantes as author sentimental about the 'good old days' of Feudalism and Chivalry?

Question Idea: Satire Q2. Compare and contrast Don Quixote's worldview with Sancho's practical, earth-bound realism. Provide examples and cite passages.

**Essay** E3. Look at *The Heptameron* and *Don Quixote*. How do they reflect the Renaissance spirit? How does using a prose narrative form (stories or fiction) allow Navarre and Cervantes to express the values and beliefs of the times? Compare and contrast with the earlier chivalric romance from medieval literature.

**IV** 10-12 **Drama**

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)  
*Dr. Faustus*

Overview Cultural Overreaching in the New World of Capitalist Competition

Introduction Many clichés surround our usual descriptions of the essence of the Renaissance. Among the most useable simplifications is this: that during this period, when Ancient Texts came pouring into the market and study, when new commercial and imperial worlds were opening, when physical and medical science were starting to mature, some men reached out boldly to embrace knowledge and action, started on personal quests which are hard to find in earlier periods. The mediaeval legend of a magician, Dr. Faustus, was just what this new cultural atmosphere could use, to express the extremities of the human quest for knowledge.

Question Q1. What do you think of Dr. Faustus' quest? Is he a noble friend of the human adventure, or a dangerous over-reacher? What kind of fate does he call down onto himself? Does he deserve it? Does Marlowe think Dr. Faustus deserves his fate?

Question Character: Faustus Q2. How does the play depict the downside of the Renaissance belief in unbounded human potential? How far does Faustus go to obtain more knowledge? Once Faustus gets his power, what does he do with it? How is the ending satisfying to the audience?

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)  
*The Tempest*

Overview Intellectual Comedy about Life as a Dream

Introduction What is it about Shakespeare that makes him of 'universal appeal.'? His English is hard for us now—not as hard as Chaucer's, of course—and his terms of reference—to the imaginative mythology of Prospero, Caliban, etc.—not of easy access for us. Yet the more we read a play like this the wider and more relevant its implications for us. What is the source of that relevance? Is it that Shakespeare touches the

essence of the human condition—in this case the sense we all have that life is both glorious and alarmingly fleeting, gone in an instant? (An ancient Greek poet called man the ‘dream of a shadow.’) The more we know any given Shakespeare masterpiece, and *The Tempest* is one, the more effectively we discover the layers of meaning that live within it.

Question Q1. Do you find the same meaning- layering effect in, say, the Greek tragedies we read? What about *Oedipus the King*? *Antigone*?

Question Theme: Knowledge Q2. How are Ariel and Caliban enslaved by Prospero? What does Ariel do? What does Caliban do? Is part of Prospero’s power dependent upon the enslavement of others? When Prospero breaks his staff and drowns his books, what are the implications? Clearly, Prospero voluntarily gives up the power he had through his books. At the same time, he is rejecting some of the Renaissance desire for and belief that boundless human power and potential are necessarily good. What are your insights into this core conflict, and how does the play make you question Renaissance ideals?

**Essay** E4: Discuss the spirit of the Renaissance and new ideas about humanism as they are expressed in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*. How and where do the plays explore and critique some of the fundamental Renaissance notions, such as limitless human potential and the ability to control nature?

**V 13-15 Essay**

Machiavelli  
Fashioning The Prince

Introduction With Macchiavelli we come, for the first time in this course, on a writer chiefly interested in the political sphere—that is, the area in which social governance deploys itself. Macchiavelli, writing from the bosom of the Italian city states which were of growing power and wealth in the Renaissance, develops in *The Prince* a practical guidebook for ‘success in ruling.’ It has become obligatory, in later times, to view Macchiavelli as a cynic, who counsels the statesman to make use of every self-interested opportunity to undermine his competition and enforce his own interests.

Question Q1. As you read *The Prince*, do you discover this kind of Macchiavelli? Or does he seem more pragmatic than cynical? In either case, what view of mankind does Macchiavelli espouse? Would he have been happy in a democracy of the sort currently in force in the industrialized West? What would he think of the way we are ‘ruled’?

Question Theme: Leadership, Government Q2. Describe Machiavelli’s attitude about the role of the Prince. How does he rationalize dishonesty and duplicity in the leader? Does he consider human nature to be good or bad? How does his belief shape his notions of how the leader should interact with his subjects? For Machiavelli, what is the ideal structure of the government? How does that compare with Bacon’s idea of a perfect world in *The New Atlantis*? Look at passages in the text that provide support for the answer.

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)  
Essais  
Humanism, Learning, and Education

Overview The Personal Voice: Private Existence and Feelings

Introduction With Shakespeare and Cervantes we have been airing the issue of ‘the modern.’ Can you identify what is cooking in those authors that is absent in, say, Boccaccio and Chaucer? (This kind of comparative exercise can be useful to you, as you attempt to penetrate texts increasingly close to your own time.) What you find of the modern, in our two Renaissance geniuses, is likely to be trumped by the personal voice of Montaigne, who speaks to us about himself, about his private existence and feelings, about his anxieties and doubts and pleasures, in an easy personal way.

Question Q1. Can you find any examples of this easy personal style in our earlier readings?

What about the earlier essays we read, by Ibn Hazm or Capellanus—dating from four centuries earlier? How is Montaigne’s voice different from theirs? Would Montaigne be comfortable dealing with the treatments of sex, social relations, money, prejudice, political power with which we occupy our minds today?

Question Theme: Tolerance Q2. Discuss Montaigne’s *Essays*, and describe what he thinks about how humans behave in society, and how he considers the influence of nature vs. nurture. Is he prescriptive, as Machiavelli and Castiglione are? Does he talk about the way people should live, or is he more of a pragmatist, talking about the way people do live? What are the implications for the creation of a new society?

Question Theme: Humanism Q3. What are Castiglione’s view of human beings and human capacity? For Castiglione, what is the ideal “Renaissance Man”? How does he see the role of man in developing education and creating society, rather than simply accepting things as they are?

Milton  
Areopagetica

Overview Positioning the Absolute Freedom of the Writer

Introduction We have read in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and know how deeply that author believed in free will, which was the basis of the angelic rebellion to which we owe our loss of paradise. (Satan exercised his free will, so did Adam; and both harvested dreadful freedoms.) In *Areopagitica*—an essay, but how different from Montaigne in style—Milton addresses the issue of freedom of the will again. His particular impulse derives from a book censorship law, to which Milton is strongly opposed, but as he enlarges his theme we see how passionately he supports the absolute freedom of the writer.

Question Q1. What do you think of Milton’s idea, of the great book as a direct progeny of a great soul? Do you feel that books are living creatures, which deserve the respect we would provide for any living being? Milton is clearly very book-centered, in the thinking we find here. Do you feel that a fine painting or piece of music is as true a reflection of its creator as is a great book?

Question Theme: Ideas Q2. Where and how does Milton promote the idea that a clash of ideas important? When and where does he promote free thinking? How does Milton’s attitude express the spirit of the Renaissance?

**Essay** E5: What do the Renaissance essayists say about humanistic potential? What do their worldly views mean in contrast with the other-worldly views of Medieval times, and how are they important when considering creating new societies?

**VI** **Finals**  
16 Review, Essay, Exam

**Final Essay Question** Please choose one question from the selections below for your final essay.

FE1. Discuss the ways in which characters in Renaissance literature (including the persona of the speaker in poetry) attempt to define themselves by opposing or expanding upon previous social or spiritual definitions humanity. This could involve various genres, such as the movement beyond Petrarchan convention in the sonnet, the recourse to magic, or the formulation of new codes of behavior.

FE2. Discuss how Renaissance ideas of boundlessness and human potential are explored in Renaissance literature. Provide examples and compare / contrast the views depicted there.

FE3. As it happens, we have read a variety of different genres during this study of the Renaissance: lyric, epic, fiction, drama. Do you think the message of a text is sharply determined by the genre in which it is created? Could the argument of *Paradise Lost* have been presented in an essay? If so, would something important in *Paradise Lost* have had to be changed? Could the tales of Marguerite de Navarre and Cervantes have been presented in poetry? At what cost?

FE4. The Renaissance is frequently described as a period marked by a revival of Greek and Latin literature. Do you see evidence of this revival in the texts we have read in LIT 513?